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ABSTRACT

Studies of self-directed learning (SDL) have generally concentrated on who self-directed learners are and what/how they learn. In 1980, Gibbons et al. used biographies of 20 "expert" self-directed learners to explore the principles and determinants of SDL. Tough (1967), Guglielmino (1977), and Spear and Mocker (1984) have respectively characterized SDL as primarily a pedagogical variable, psychological variable, and systemic variable. In so doing, they have successively shifted the focus of research on SDL from the learning project to the individual learner and to the circumstances surrounding SDL activities. In addition, the following three paradigms may be associated with mainstream literature in the field of SDL: (1) the contingency control paradigm, according to which the determinants of SDL are contingent upon external forces; (2) the psychodynamic paradigm, which focuses on behavior as a response to needs, inner impulses, and innate instincts; and (3) the systemic paradigm, according to which human experiences/activities (including SDL) are inseparable from the myriad factors and events constituting a person's past and present "life field." Together, these three paradigms can serve as a framework for classifying individuals' explanations of why and how they came to acquire their professional skills in a self-directed manner. (Contains 32 references.) (MN)

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SELF-DIRECTED PROFESSIONALS AND AUTODIDACTIC CHOICE
A Framework for Analysis

By Paul Bouchard

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The following is a proposed framework for analyzing the results of a series of interviews on the subject of autodidactic choice among self-directed professionals. A rationale will be offered for conducting a study among self-directed professionals, and the concept of autodidactic choice will be presented. A framework for analysis will be derived from the writings of three influential authors in the field of Self-Directed Learning.

The "Self-Directed Professional"

Workers and professionals whose occupations demand high-level skills and an appreciable degree of expertise have reported that their work-related competencies were acquired outside formal settings. Gibbons' (1980) landmark study of self-directed experts has shown that certain "exceptional" individuals have become prominent authorities in their field, while eschewing formal training. While Gibbons' methodology involved the analysis of self-directed experts' biographies, the present study calls for interviews with "Self-Directed Professionals" who have acquired, outside formal learning situations, the knowledge and skills required for the exercise of their occupation. For the purpose of this investigation, 12 individuals were identified as having acquired post-secondary level, work-related skills outside formal settings. Contrary to Gibbons' sample, these people are "exceptional" only in that they have managed to learn without attending school. Also diverging from Gibbon's methodology, which depended on written biographies and therefore did not involve the subjects' participation in the research, the subjects identified for this study are capable of articulating the reasons, purposes and circumstances that have led to their learning venture.

Tough (1971) submits that learners usually engage in learning

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activities because of the benefits they expect to derive by doing so. Presumably, individuals engage in self-directed learning for similar purposes. In the case of people who have acquired high-level professional skills on their own, this could mean that they have seen, beyond the anticipated results of their learning venture, some practical advantage in opting for a self-directed mode of learning. Much has been said about the adverse effects of limited formal schooling, and the current societal consensus points to its pitfalls rather than its benefits. Nevertheless, there are some individuals who, for reasons of their own, seem to have perceived some advantages in pursuing their learning goals in a non-formal manner rather than in an available college or university setting.

These learners could offer some insight into better ways to adapt learning methods to our present-day, fast-changing world. The circumstances leading up to their learning venture, outside existing college and university programs, may shed some light into the underlying determinants of Self-Directed Learning. Could the opportunity-cost of foregoing formal training, in some circumstances, be offset by the perceived advantages of pursuing learning goals in a self-directed manner? If so, what would these "advantages" be? Could these self-directed professionals have noticed the widening gap between academic, "formal" work-related learning programs, and the most basic demands of the employment market? They would not be alone in this. On the other hand, the motives, purposes and circumstances surrounding and leading up to the SDL projects may well be of a combined, or altogether different nature. Whatever the case, considering the current state of available knowledge in the area of Self-Directed Learning, this investigation may represent the first documented account of the reasons why in some cases, for some people, pursuing non-formal learning is more desirable than pursuing formal learning. These, and other questions are addressed by the present inquiry.

What Is SDL?

SDL has been characterized, in turn, as a high-level skill (Martin, 19??), a personality trait (Guglielmino, 1977; Oddi, 1986), a useful technique (Knowles, 1975), and a learning goal (Mezirow, 1985; Brookfield, 1985). All of these of views may one day be reconciled inside an encompassing theory of SDL. In order to establish SDL's basic parameters, however, it would seem useful at the present to consider SDL as a tangible phenomenon that may, or may not in fact be brought about by individual learners' skills, personality, knowledge, values, or other unexplored variable. Another observation is that recent research in the area of SDL is based on the implicit premise that SDL represents, for individual learners, a desirable pursuit. This, however, has not been demonstrated. Indeed, a high proportion of self-directed learning projects are reported to have originated from the impossibility, for the learner, to have pursued learning in any other manner than SDL. From the point of view of the learner at least, this hardly points to SDL as a "more" desirable avenue than any other.

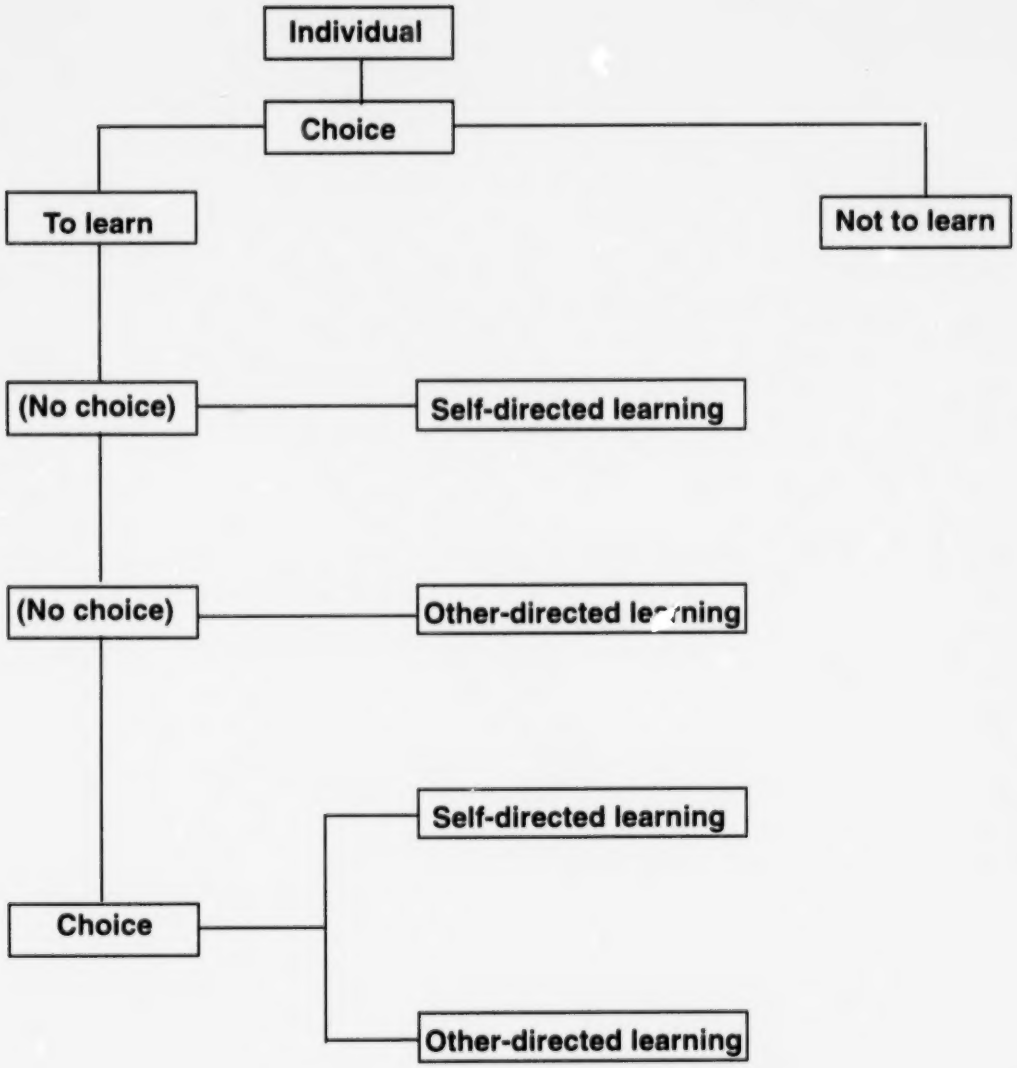
A third problem encountered when trying to articulate a workable definition of SDL is that it is sometimes construed as the result of a desire to learn, rather than of a desire to learn in a SDL manner, specifically. This makes it difficult to contrast SDL to its opposite, "Other-Directed Learning". Bonham (1991, p.92) argues that there are in fact two possible opposites of self-directedness, namely (1) a preference for other-directed learning, and (2) a desire to avoid learning altogether. Care must be taken to not oppose self-directed learners to non-learners, which in this context would be the equivalent of comparing apples to oranges. This type of confusion has arisen in the past, notably in the area of Self-Directed Learning "Readiness".

These three requirements of our definition - that SDL be

construed as tangible, desirable and opposed to other-directed learning - are central to the study of SDL in general, and to this investigation in particular. Failure to meet any one of these requirements would evidently mean the loss of much of the appeal, interest and value of the study of SDL.

These problems may be circumvented by a characteristic shared by all the SDL episodes considered for the purpose of this study: the existence, known to the learners, of an alternative course of action which could have been pursued in place of the SDL project. In the presence of a formal alternative, opting for non-formal learning would seem to indicate a preference, or a "choice" in favor of SDL over formal methods. Thus, SDL may be contrasted specifically to "formal" learning, rather than to "non-learning" in general, and may be said to represent, for the learner, some "advantage" over other alternatives. By considering those situations where SDL activities are the result of a choice in the presence of a real alternative, SDL may be construed as tangible, desirable and opposed to other-directed learning.

Figure 1 shows how learning may be presented in two ways (1) as resulting from a choice, on the part of the learner, in favor of either self-directed or "other-directed" learning; or (2) as resulting from a desire to learn, in a context where the learner has no other choice - if learning is to occur at all - but to pursue learning goals in either a self-directed, or an "other-directed" manner.


Individual
Choice
To learn
Not to learn
(No choice)
Self-directed learning
(No choice)
Other-directed learning
Self-directed learning
Choice
Other-directed learning

Self-Directed Professionals and Autodidactic Choice

For every "profession" considered in the course of this investigation, a corresponding program of study was offered in a local post-secondary institution. Subjects were selected on this basis. Therefore, all subjects had the option of carrying out their learning venture in an other-directed, institutional context. This fact was known to them (it would indeed be difficult to imagine that it was not, considering the nature of the learning projects). Consequently, it may be said that work-related competencies have been acquired by the subjects in a self-directed manner <u>despite</u> the fact that they could have pursued their learning goals following an other-directed, institutional method.

Autodidactic Choice

The choice, not only between self-directedness and other-directedness, but also between formal and informal educational settings, has been called elsewhere "Le choix autodidactique" (Bouchard, 1990), and will be referred to here, for the sake of consistency, as "Autodidactic Choice". Within its framework, previous studies into the nature of SDL activities may be divided into two categories, one of which allows for the notion of choice, while the other does not

1. The first category includes SDL activities undertaken in the pursuit of learning goals which are not accessible in any formal setting and for which, therefore, SDL represents the only available option. These are hobbies, recreational and cultural endeavors, and learning needs too specific to be included in formal learning situations. They represent the majority of self-directed learning projects identified in the literature (as tabulated by Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Tough 1971, Serre, 1977; Ceszjkarevicz, 1990, and others). They are

not the result of a choice in the presence of an alternative.

2. The second category includes SDL activities carried out in order to acquire knowledge / skills which are offered in existing institutional curricula. If these situations do not actually place SDL on the same footing as formal settings as the basis for a conscious and deliberate "choice", they at least represent a very real option in favor of one course of action (namely, SDL) at the exclusion of all others (including "formal" options).

The concept of "choice" is expanded here to include all instances where a course of action has been adopted in the presence of a known alternative. In the same way that individuals, in any given situation, have the option of learning or not learning, they also have, in some situations, the option of learning in a self-directed, or an "other-directed" manner. Inversely, some situations deprive the learner of the opportunity to select a preferred avenue for carrying out learning activities.

In this perspective, the study of the motives, purposes and circumstances leading to adult learning projects in general could be fruitfully applied to self-directed learning projects in particular. If it is conceivable to identify people's motives for learning, it should also be possible to explore their reasons for learning in a self-directed manner - while keeping the two issues distinct. That is, if the learning project is the result of a choice in favor of self-directedness. In the absence of this choice, who is to say if the learner has any "reason", or was more "ready" to adopt a self-directed approach in the first place? This essential distinction allows for the conceptual opposite of Self-Directed Learning, in cases where learners had a "choice" as to their mode of learning, to be "other-directed learning", at the exclusion of all other

learning-related concepts.

Why SDL?

Previous inquiries in the area of Self-Directed Learning have concentrated mainly on "WHO" self-directed learners are (Guglielmino, 1977), on "WHAT" they learn (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Tough, 1978), and on "HOW" Self-Directed Learning occurs (Tough, 1971; Danis & Tremblay, 1985). Little attention has been given to "WHY" individuals become self-directed learners - perhaps because this latter question has been presumed to be included in the former three. However, if SDL is construed as being learner-centered, then the learner must be given credit not only for pursuing his or her learning goals, but also for choosing to do so, and doing so in a self-directed manner.

Two studies have briefly addressed the question of why people opt for SDL. As part of an inquiry into the needs of self-directed learners (Tremblay, 1981), subjects were asked how they came to learn in a self-directed manner. Answers included perceived personality traits, a yearning for more creative freedom, some specific learning needs, and a need for more convenient pacing of activities. When asked a similar question, subjects in another study (Penland, 1978) invoked their learning style, their preference for self-paced activities, unwillingness to conform to rigid schedules, lack of free time, and pragmatic considerations such as related expenses and travelling time. In both instances, the research focus was not on autodidactic choice, and the questions were more or less tagged on as complementary information at the end of an interview schedule. No attempt was made to distinguish between learning activities that resulted from a choice, and others. (For example, a number of respondents in both studies stated that their chosen subject matter was unavailable in a formal context.)

Another study (Gibbons et al, 1980) focused on biographies of 20 "expert" Self-Directed Learners as a means to explore the "Principles of Self-Education". Results were analyzed and reduced to 8 metacategories of possible influences. These "determinants" of self-directed learning offer insight into the possible reasons behind Autodidactic Choice, with two reservations, however, acknowledged by Gibbons: (1) the study used biographies, which were not autobiographies and therefore did not represent the learners' point of view; (2) biographies tend to idealize their subjects in the light of contemporary values; this leads to a type of "hagiographic" distortion

The Subject As Instrument

The problems reported by Gibbons direct attention to the subjects themselves as potentially more relevant sources of information. The "Subject as Instrument" is not a novel concept. Lincoln & Guba (1985) list advantages to an approach centered on the subjects' perceptions, which include the following

(1) Responsiveness. Subjects respond to, and interact with, all dimensions of their own experience.
(2) Adaptability. "Paper instruments" developed for the assessment of one factor are often useless in the presence of another. Human beings, on the other hand, are infinitely more adaptable.
(3) Holistic Emphasis. Human subjects are usually able to make some sense of the "buzzing confusion" of their own ambient reality.

The present inquiry being exploratory by nature, data collected need not be restricted to a predetermined typology or

group of set categories. Human action is not "causally" determined, and human behavior is not subjected to any kind of "objective" determinism, as are some physical phenomena. Human beings, in fact, "choose" the causes for their own behavior among a vast array of possible determinants every time they decide on a future course of action, or explain "why" they did something in the past. This is supported by Bandura's (1977, p.39) contention that "self-generated influences operate deterministically on behavior in the same way as external sources". These "chosen causes" vary widely from one individual to the next.

The only way, therefore, to have a clue as to the reasons behind someone's motives and purposes is to ask that person directly. Furthermore, the attribution by individuals of the "causes" of their behavior may well rank, in its own right, among the most influential determinants of that very behavior (Weiner, 1986). Perhaps this is another reason the question, "Why self-directed learners choose SDL" remains unanswered it is basically a phenomenological question, and in this sense defies empirical investigation.

The Population

This inquiry focuses on men and women who have embarked upon a learning venture that resulted from a "choice" in favor of SDL. Candy (1990), Long (1989), and Bonham (1989) have independently reached the conclusion that Self-Directed Learning may occur in formal education settings as well as in non-formal settings. In other words, there are two "types" of Self-Directed Learning the first involves "organized" learning situations, while the other requires that the individual seek out learning resources in the "natural" setting. Without discounting that SDL may in fact be of a dual nature, and that formal learning situations are not in themselves antithetic to the notion of SDL, this definition nevertheless leads to some confusion as to the overall practical construct of SDL. To avoid this confusion, only those learning projects that have occurred outside formal institutional settings will be considered or the purposes of this investigation. This should ensure that the observed phenomena account for at least some measure of self-directedness.

Furthermore, the concept of Self-Directed Learning is opposed here, specifically , to "other-directed learning". This supposes that individuals identified as potential subjects have carried out at least one self-directed learning project which, because of its particular nature, can be contrasted to "other-directed learning" as its conceptual opposite. In this way, it is possible to explore the reasons, circumstances and motives leading up to SDL episodes, as opposed to all other types of learning ventures. In the context of professional and work-related skills, this will mean seeking out individuals who have acquired, using non-formal methods, the knowledge and skills they need in the everyday exercise of their profession.

Long (1989) has contended that self-directedness is measured

by the degree of both "psychological" and "pedagogical" control that the learner retains over the various dimensions of the learning project. Accordingly, learning efforts carried out by subjects identified for the purpose of this study should rank high on both scales. This rules out knowledge acquired at someone else's prompting (a teacher or employer, for example), as well as learning conducted in a formal or an institutional setting.

All professions to which access is not regulated by legislation or by the demands of a juridically mandated professional organization include practitioners who have acquired their training in a self-directed manner as defined above. They are engineering consultants, computer analysts, film-makers, tax accountants, journalists, managers, editors, librarians, etc. These "Self-Directed Professionals" constitute the population from which 12 individuals were identified and asked to participate in the study by means of in open-ended interviews.

Individual variables such as age, sex, socio-economic background, number of years and area of previous formal schooling, have been taken into account. The limited size of the sample makes it impossible to constitute a "representative" cross-section, but care was taken not to burden the sample with unnecessary bias towards one or the other of these potentially significant categories.

Three Views of SDL

In order to analyze the contents of the interviews, it will be useful to sketch out a framework for a classification of the "determinants" of Autodidactic Choice. Such a framework may be derived from the works of three influential authors in the field of SDL research.

Different views of SDL have been put forth respectively by Tough (1967), Guglielmino (1977) and Spear (1984, 1988). Their

importance lies in the fact that these authors have considerably influenced research in the field of SDL, and provided a framework for numerous subsequent studies. Each of these author's views may be characterized as holding specific assumptions as to the nature of SDL, namely that SDL is primarily (a) a pedagogical variable; (b) a psychological variable; and (c) a systemic variable.

Allen Tough focuses on SDL as an "act of learning". His works have stressed the importance of the SDL phenomenon (Tough, 1967), the steps involved in planning and carrying out SDL projects (Tough, 1971) and the benefits learners expect to derive from their learning (Tough, 1979). Toughs view of SDL may be said to focus on the "learning" aspects of SDL projects, and to consider SDL as primarily a "**Pedagogical variable**".

Guglielmino (1977) focuses on individuals' predisposition to espouse a self-directed orientation in their learning. According to this view, a person's likelihood to engage in SDL activities is linked to a personal propensity to do so. Guglielmino's Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDRLS) has been widely used to establish correlations between this particular trait and other personal characteristics. This view of SDL is associated with individuals' inner character and disposition, and for this reason may be said to construe SDL as a "**Psychological variable**".

Spear and Mocker (1984) have contributed the notion of "Organizing Circumstance" as a framework for SDL. According to their view, the consciously acknowledged "learning need" (as described by Tough) and the "inner disposition" of the individual (as expressed by Guglielmino) do not fully account for the emergence of SDL. What is needed in order to better grasp the phenomenon, these authors argue, is an understanding of the "Life Field" which encompasses it (this is a Lewinian concept Lewin, 1951). According to this view, SDL exists within the larger system of interacting influences in a person's life, and may therefore be

said to construe SDL as a **Systemic variable**.

The shift of focus from (1) the learning project, (2) to the individual learner, and finally (3) to the circumstances surrounding SDL activities, illustrates the ongoing struggle to come to terms with the conceptual difficulties inherent in the notion of SDL. These views, it should be stressed, are not in opposition, but contribute collectively to our understanding of a complex phenomenon. Indeed, they cannot be said to cover all the bases, and SDL may be examined in the future from any number of different points of view.

What is of particular interest, however, is the epistemological position which may be associated with each of these differing approaches to SDL, specifically as regards the determinants of human behavior. As will be shown, each of the three perspectives can be traced to a distinct view of what actually "determines" human behavior, or, as one colleague put it "What makes people tick". These views are, respectively, the "Contingency Control", the "Psychodynamic", and the "Systemic" paradigms.

Three Paradigms Applied to Human Behavior

The question, "Why do some people choose to pursue their learning goals in a self-directed manner?", supposes that it is possible to "explain" the reasons why anyone, indeed, chooses to do anything at all in the first place. Bandura (1986) has shown that, throughout the history of the human and social sciences, several different "paradigms" were used as a conceptual base by different authors in order to explore the "determinants" of human behavior. In a similar vein, three different paradigms may be associated with mainstream SDL literature.

The Contingency Control Paradigm. One of the foremost tenets of behaviorist epistemology is the notion of contingency

control (Skinner, 1969). This concept refers to the determinants of behavior as being contingent upon external forces. According to this view, non-genetically determined behavior is cued by stimuli that precedes it, and shaped by stimuli that reinforces it. Cognition allows for the added determinant of anticipated results (Bandura, 1977, p.12). This view may be linked to Tough's often stated explanation of "Why adults choose to learn". According to Tough (1968; 1971; 1979), adults engage in learning projects because they consciously expect to derive some benefit from their learning. Thus, the determinants of their decision to learn are akin to Skinner's behaviorist "Contingency Control" paradigm.

The Psychodynamic Paradigm. Behavior has also been described as a response to needs, inner impulses and innate instincts, often acting at unconscious levels, as put forth by Freud (1935) and others. The "determinants" of human behavior, within this paradigm, are to be found in the inner self and innate characteristics of individuals. The "psychodynamic" view of human behavior may be linked to Guglielmino's underlying assumption which ascribes propensity towards Self-Directed Learning to individuals' inner disposition.

The Systemic Paradigm. Finally, human experience has been depicted by Kurt Lewin (1951) as inseparable from the myriad factors and events which constitute a person's past and present "Life Field". The "circumstances" surrounding the events in a person's life at any given time may be endowed by the individual with a positive or negative "valence" according to the individual's own perception. This global perception of the world will serve, in turn, to determine the next course of action to be undertaken (DeRivera, 1976). Spear and Mocker's (1984, p.1) acknowledged debt to Lewin's Field Theory indicates that for the purpose of defining the determinants of Self-Directed Learning, they have adopted a paradigm analogous to Lewin's "Field Theory".

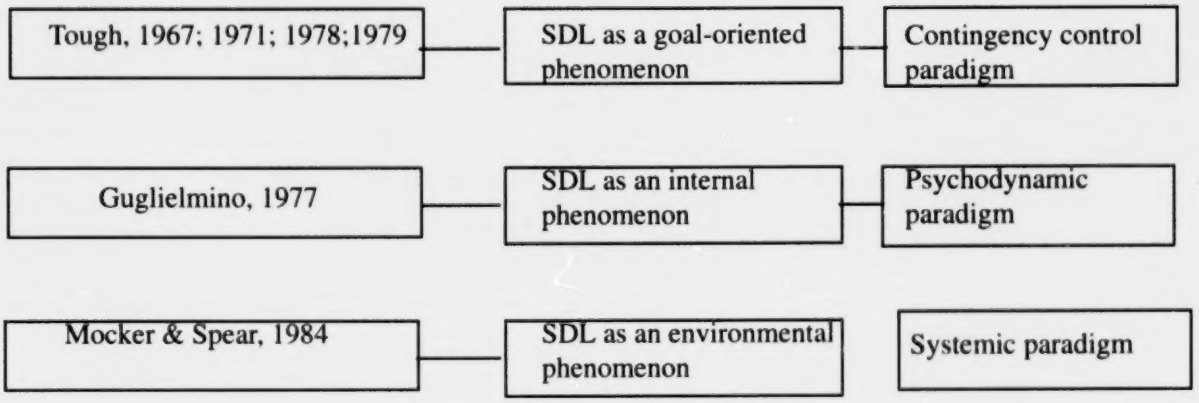


Fig. 2. The three views of Self-Directed Learning, and their respective underlying paradigms

The three paradigms presented above serve as a combined framework for classifying subjects' explanations of why / how they came to acquire their professional skills in a self-directed manner. Inquiry into attribution, by the subjects, of the "reasons" behind their Autodidactic Choice follows in the steps of Danis & Tremblay's (1985) investigation of self-directed learners' assessment, from their own perspective, of their learning process.

Conclusion

In allowing for individuals' perceived motives and purposes in pursuing learning goals in a self-directed manner, the present study acknowledges the importance of personal attribution not only as a legitimate and important factor for establishing the determinants of Autodidactic Choice, but also as an additional determining factor informing that very choice. According to Weiner (1986), attribution of causality by individuals to their own behavior not only points to real causal relationships between behavior and its determinants, but also serves to influence future decisions and actions. For example, we are much less likely to initiate a demanding project when convinced that we lack the necessary aptitudes for the job, or that circumstances do not lend themselves to that course of action. Thus, our perception of the reasons behind our past actions may well serve as an important "determinant" for our future ones. In this way, a link may be established between the perceived nature of the "determinants" of Autodidactic Choice, and the actual making of that choice.

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